

Feelings

Many years ago I read a book that was on the New York Times Bestseller list entitled, "Emotional Intelligence." The author was Daniel Goleman, and Mr. Goleman is a journalist and psychologist. I still recall quite vividly how I felt when I initially read the title of this book, because to coin a phrase made by prolific author James Baldwin, "I think with my feelings." That is to say that I trust my intuition, at times even more than I do rational thought. It has served me well but in a culture, and a denomination that emphasizes the left part of the brain, I have always at some level felt a bit odd. This is not to say that I am anti-intellectual, it's just that I believe that the ability to be more in touch and aware of one's feelings make us a just a tad bit more human. At least feelings have the potential to do that.

It has been my experience that it is only the brain most of us want (and in and of itself there is no doubt that it is a marvelous organ) but no consciousness. This is partly due in my view, because we are children of the West, children of "The Enlightenment." You know what I mean, Renee Decartes and I think therefore I am. Many of us today worship the god of science and forget that science is a tool of learning and not the only way of knowing. Science is about causation and religion and spirituality are about finding meaning. There is no "I-Thou" relationship in science. Science gives us tools and religion asks if it is okay to use those tools. At time science can be like an engine that feeds on itself. Einstein said that "the intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift." He also said that science without religion is lame and religion without science is blind, but that is for another time. Emotions are often troublesome and human maturity requires that we keep some urges of feeling in check. We all know that there are occasions when we must have the capacity to act against the pull of inner inclination. However, we have also come to realize that lives lived without laughter, sadness, longing, and joy are impoverished in some important sense, and that admirable forms of human life will be characterized by emotional intelligence.

And yet as we look at our world today, we can talk about going to Mars. We can conquer outer space but not inner space. The means by which we live has definitely outdistanced the ends for which we live. We live in a left brained world but that is changing and the publication of Goleman's book had a lot to do with that.

Our culture has very little to say about the so called "negative emotions." Anger is bad for the heart, depression is deadly, and anxiety is the culprit which undermines the intellect and the immune system. In short, so called "negative emotions" adversely affect the body's ability to heal itself. Okay. Yet I cannot help but notice that every uncomfortable feeling or emotion---from grief to rage---is labled unhealthy, dysfunctional, and/or destructive. Of course the drug companies love this. I wonder what Jewish Americans, folk of color, GBLTQ brothers and sisters, and war veterans, or any people who are trying to make some sort of sense out of life would respond to the idea that their emotions about their experiences are labled destructive? Christian Ethicist, Beverly Harrison was a professor at Union Theological seminary when I attended. Professor Harrison says that all

knowledge is body mediated, and that most male philosophers are obsessed with the rational or the head. According to Harrison, if we do not know what we are feeling we cannot live moral lives. We have physical and emotional feelings but we know that we can rationalize anything.

Rationality is both body and mind integrated. Relationship, not autonomy is the key to living together as human beings for we are relational beings. If feelings are damaged or cut off, rationality is impaired and so in the absence of feeling we cannot fully live and be moral forces in our world.

I grew up with the belief that painful feelings were to be avoided like the plague. It was only much later that I discovered that experiencing these feelings was part of what made me a wholly integrated human being, not repressing them. I discovered that there were some sorrows that time could mute but not erase, and that painful emotions were there for a reason. I submit to you that anger, hostility, rage, and aggression are not necessarily synonymous. Fear, anxiety, worry, and distress are not necessarily “negative emotions,” nor are depression, sadness, and pessimism. Emotional terms that are not well defined make for bad science.

It is true that, hostility, rage, and aggression may well cause heart attacks, but without certain forms of anger we would become morally inert. Without anger we would have no boundaries. Good fences make good neighbors Robert Frost reminds us. Anxiety may weaken the immune system (if it is chronic) but fear is our response to danger, without which we would be as vulnerable to harm as if we couldn't register physical pain.

Back in the day there were, and I guess still are, plenty of books that contribute to our culture's emotion phobia. Some of these books can open one up to high levels of spirituality but if you haven't done your feeling work, if you are already cut are from your feelings, this can be very dangerous. Many of these books talk about our physical bodies being an illusion as is the material world in which we live and there is much truth to that in my mind. Sages and mystics from the east have been trying to tell us this for centuries so this message is not new. But inevitably, no matter how much one is convinced that this world is an illusion, one leaves a room by walking through the doorway and not a wall. Have you ever noticed that? I have.

We must learn to acknowledge and to navigate our feelings and emotions in order to grow up and to discover those hidden portions of ourselves. Our culture has a fundamental fear about the power of raw emotion, mixed with a set of so called normal beliefs about what constitutes “rationality.” This emotional/reasoning dualism overrides our thinking about feelings, telling us that reason is trustworthy and feelings are dangerous.

The opposite of this is to be constantly told to get in touch with one's feelings, but only if those feelings are good, because any painful emotion is a threat to happiness, harmony, and inner growth. The emphasis is not on learning from feelings but on letting go of them. What is missing is any sense that emotions—positive or negative—can be teachers.

The more we shun or disregard our feelings, especially the so-called negative emotions, we will either act them in or act them out. Not great choices. Our destructive

behavior is not a result of these emotions in and of themselves; it's because of our refusal to extend our mindfulness of these emotions.

Sorrow, fear, anger, and despair are as much a part of being a human being as is a sense of wonder, joy, and love. Sorrow teaches us about our interconnectedness.

We grieve because we are not alone and what connects us to others and the world can break our hearts.

Fear alerts us to protect our survival, extending beyond our instinct to self-preservation to our concern for the preservation of others, including other species and the planet itself.

Anger alerts us that something is wrong that needs to be corrected. Despair requires of us to go deeper to make meaning out of apparent meaninglessness. When these emotions are ignored—It's a mess so watch out. Anger may become chronic hostility and rage. Fear may produce phobias and psychosomatic illnesses. Sorrow may produce chronic depression and isolation. If we are open to it, difficult feelings will move us in the direction of healing and harmony.

Difficult emotions, when intentionally and mindfully experienced can be profound spiritual healers. For instance grief can move us from sorrow for who or what was lost to an expansive attitude for what remains. Out of the fear and fragility of life, we can know the spirit's invincibility. Camus says it best when he says that in the midst of winter, he discovered within himself an invincible summer.

Anger can transform disconnection into a heightened trust in relationship to oneself. Even despair, seemingly one of the most misunderstood emotions in this age of Prozac and other chemicals, has an alchemy all its own, with the potential of bringing a renewed sense of faith, which is not an opiate to the to the painful emotions being denied, but a profound commitment to life as it is. We must also remember that emotions are not just in the mind, they are in the body as well. We can eat our feelings, shop our feelings, sex our feelings, etc. Emotions affect the way we eat, breathe, and make love. We will not learn the wisdom of our emotions as long as we internalize a culture which abhors or ignores the wisdom of the body. One can spend 20 years in psychoanalysis and in the end we know how to talk about our feelings but not how to feel them. Emotional control is not always rational and is often culturally sanctioned compulsion. We become human doings rather than human beings. Developing a consistent meditation and prayer practice can also assist us in the process of self-transformation.

Many of us on this planet are living lives of quiet desperation. Anger about our polluted and desecrated planet, fear for our future and our children's future; all of this going on in our increasingly frenetic, addictive-compulsive, attention deficient hyperactive, style of living. In the midst of all of this, the question remains, what are we to do with our feelings? Perhaps a journeying collectively through our negative emotions embedded in the destruction of the planet may be what is required of us before we alter our technological course to be compatible with sustainable life on planet earth.

The mushroom clouds of so called negative emotions in our mental skies threaten to break our head and hearts and continually contribute to the over rationality that hides the profound irrationality of our 21st century civilization.

I am drawn to this denomination not only for what it is but for what it can be. Because I did not have to leave my intellect at the door, I became a UU. UUs are people who are expected to use their minds and to arrive at their own rational conclusions where everyone does not have to think alike to love alike. My favorite philosopher William James puts it this way, " ... we cannot resolve the matter of belief, knowing, or acceptance in purely intellectual terms. The emotional nature must resolve the matter. There is a combination of intellect, our voluntary will, social experience, and the emotional reaction involved in the development of the area of faith or knowledge. (Challenge of a liberal Faith p. 102, by George Marshall.)

We must do more to bring our hearts and minds into all areas of life including our churches. In biblical times, the heart was considered the seat of the will and emotions. In the Exodus story, the Hebrew God hardens Pharoah's heart so that he could not, indeed would not free the Hebrew slaves, leaving Pharoah without the will, the courage, or the compassion to witness the suffering he was causing and to act on it.

With all of this being said, one must remember not to believe everything one thinks, and also not to believe everything one feels, especially if we are not excavating where and why these thoughts and feelings are occurring. Most importantly, being aware of what we are feeling brings us in contact with the most important relationship we will ever know; and that is the relationship with ourselves. We need both heart and mind integrated to become whole, healthy, authentic human beings.